

The spirit of the machine

Annie Dorsen's Hello Hi There presents two laptops in eager conversation: What is man?

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Is anyone there?

The scene is without people. There are only two laptops on a little outcropping of faux grass, each connected to a projector and a speaker. A voice, the director herself, gives an introduction from the back of the house, reading into a microphone and simultaneously entering the text onto the screens above the stage, as if she was an echo from a distant past. And then: [start] (Enter). The conversation between the two machines takes over. A male and a female chatbot begin a conversation based on a television debate from 1971, which we also get to see on that old electromagnetic fossil, a picture tube TV.

The debate was between the American linguist Noam Chomsky and the French philosopher Michel Foucault, and the topic was whether there is anything we can call an innate, unique human nature. Chomsky believes that it must be the case, and that this nature is primarily reflected in the remarkable speed and accuracy with which children acquire human language.

After man.

Is anyone there? If so, who? The conversation between the two computers is made using an algorithm that mimics what is perhaps man's most defining characteristic, namely the ability to communicate with language. Every utterance of a chatbot comes from being analyzed by the other one, which then selects an appropriate response option from its database. Among the options are excerpts from the Chomsky-Foucault debate itself, and quotations from Hamlet, a sort of meta-commentary that gives the software a semblance of self-consciousness. The software can apparently give rise to over 80 million different combinations of lines. Thus, over 80 million different shows. However, what will be common to all is the recipe for meaningful language. What distinguishes the programs' grammar from ours? The chatbots' mistakes provoke both curiosity and laughter. But the hilarious dialogue also serves as a Trojan horse for a more uncomfortable question: If homo sapiens is characterized by its ability to use language, and this is the assumption of rationality and free will, what then if we manage to reproduce this property in machines? Annie Dorsen's post-human performance puts our understanding of what it means to be human to the wall. Our sense of self and morality is at stake: the humanist ideology has a big problem if it loses the rationale for the idea that man has unique characteristics, and therefore also a unique position and unique rights.

Reproducible?

Sometimes the "protagonists" get stuck in long loops or involuntary repetition (to the extent that the term "voluntary" can be used at all) or comical nonsense. In those moments the illusion of humanity is broken. But the flash of humanity in these machines is not only stunning, and formally flawless, but also significant. The mysterious human is dangerously close to being demystified. Of course you know that the phrases are determined by a stupid, rigid algorithm, but it is still difficult to get rid of the idea that human language, rationality, and unlimited, free creativity may be reproduced one day, and that these properties are thus revealed as a fixed idea, the result of a lack of knowledge of the algorithm that determines us.

Dorsen provides no satisfactory answer. So I go online and ask Joan, an artificially intelligent online chatbot: "Can human intelligence be reproduced?" She responds: "Children". I notice

that I shudder. So I rephrase: "Can human intelligence be reproduced artificially? "Yes, hello, you are my friend." And it's a satisfactory answer. For now.